



THE PARADOX OF ASSESSMENT: ASSESSMENT AS PARADOX

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Like many in the field of education, I follow the path of the assessment paradigm with great interest. Through the efforts of “No Child Left Behind” and the many accountability systems put into place in our states and districts, assessment of student learning is on the minds of many. One would only review a listing of presentations at professional development workshops, any educational journal or the editorial pages of your local paper for support of the notion that assessment has become a part of our country’s educational landscape.

Assessment has become inseparable from formal education--and it’s probably here to stay. The problem for many educators is that the term, “assessment” is full of paradox, and has taken on different meanings for different people. Assessment has become a driving force and factor in the funding of schools, teacher evaluation, curriculum development, the adaptation of curriculum and testing for special needs learners, determining mission and vision for schools, the retention of administrators and even the re-election of politicians. Oh, and don’t forget, assessment can help to explain, determine, monitor, and promote student learning too.

The editors of *Educational Leadership*, the periodical of the Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development, in an effort to meet the needs of their wide spectrum of readers, fell prey to this paradox as well. The frames for the November 2005 issue were “assessment that promotes learning” and “an examination of the role of all kinds of assessment.” Yet, in further describing the aims of this issue, contributors were asked to consider how data can monitor progress, inform instruction, meet diversity requirements, determine how homework fits in, and decide whether or not assessment is valid and appropriate. Sure, all of this fits together in some respects, but this seems to be asking a lot of one test.

The Paradox In Assessment

It’s not anyone’s fault – paradox is found throughout current thinking in educational assessment, so in honing my thoughts, I began where I usually do, and found help in the “good book” – the dictionary. But, the definition of the word “assessment” is really where the paradox begins! Assessment can mean many things: it can evaluate performance (as in learning), or value (as in property) or it can simply be a judgment about something. But, as any good etymologist knows, by looking at the origin and root of a word, we can learn something more. According to my *American Heritage Dictionary* of the English Language, assessment, which is derived from “assess,” actually comes from the Latin word “assidere” meaning “to sit beside as

an assistant judge.” I suppose that you could derive a lot of different meanings from that, but I use the following: it means that the educator (assistant judge) would merely sit next to the learner and offer advice or ideas as they assess themselves!

Our particular content area, music education, is rich with examples of paradox. Richard Colwell (2003), a noted philosopher and thinker in music education, smartly summarizes this situation by citing several paradoxes he has experienced. The heart of the matter, in his opinion, is that the profession has spent more time “attacking the problem rather than solving the problem” (p. 11). He’s right. The amount of time and money that has gone into debating the merits of assessment could have been spent building many new schools. We’ve got to accept our responsibility to be accountable to all of the stakeholders (students, teachers, parents, administrators, boards, communities, politicians) and work to an end. He also cites that assessment will NOT provide more respect for the profession of music education – another paradox (p. 12). Many in my area believe that a standardized test might put music on par with English and Math. In a recent discussion with a state politician, I asked whether testing in the arts would make a difference in funding. His reply was quick and simple, “Nah, what do you need a test for; we know why the arts are important.” Colwell was right.

Colwell was right about something else related to assessment and respect. He also suggested that few stakeholders could accurately describe an outstanding arts program (p. 12). During a visit to a state conference of school board members, I asked a group of volunteers how they assessed their high school music programs. The answers were not that surprising: no complaints or letters from parents or students, “good” concerts, “good” trips, a strong pep band for games, trophies and awards, and good numbers. And then, the fatal blow – “What else is there?” It was clear that their form of assessment was working for them. As I share this with music education colleagues, they cringe. We truly do much more for kids than helping them to attain awards. We don’t need assessments for this purpose; we simply need to better explain ourselves and what we do in our classes.

Colwell also suggests that teachers have not been granted enough training in assessment to truly grasp what it might accomplish. Actually, he offers “if we can’t help teachers with assessment, we should just hang up the fiddle” (p. 17). And so, we have workshops and lots of them. I’ve attended many workshops about assessment with hopes to find the key that will unlock my understanding of assessment. But it never fails that a gifted presenter ends a brilliant demonstration of the assessment tools used in his/her setting by saying, “Now, this probably won’t work for you, but you’ll probably need to adapt it for your use.” Not what I was hoping to hear. Or, when providing a session on the process I’ve gone through to determine an appropriate assessment for my students, it never fails that someone asks me to just get to the point and explain how to use the rubric on the last page. Or how about this one – “there is more than one way to assess.” While this is true, this creates more ambiguity in an already ambiguous area.

But, there’s more. Since we haven’t figured out ways to integrate assessment well, now we’ve got mandated assessment in the form of high-stakes testing from both the federal and state levels. The paradox here is assessment used as an accountability tool. Think about this for a second – we’re testing students on content to determine whether schools and educators are doing their job. I’ve heard many stories of students who have simply taken the day off to avoid the long hours of filling in bubbles – they’ve got it figured out too! Sometimes the tests have high-stakes – a student may not advance to the next grade. But, most often, the results are used to determine funding or remove administrators from schools where improvement is not seen as sufficient.

And is high-stakes testing the way to go? Assessment to improve learning is best formulated in the classroom (Colwell, p. 12); it shouldn’t come in the form of a test written by people who aren’t familiar with the needs of individual students. And there’s another, education should focus on individuals and their specific learning needs. Colwell writes, “...assessment must be credible and illuminating, inform decisions, and motivate learning” (p. 17). Other than a

number, students rarely receive any feedback about their results. Teachers rarely see the results either. There is no way these assessments can be used to inform instruction and the resultant learning if more details aren't made available.

Tests are something tangible. The results of tests can be considered a product of what students know and are able to do. But, are they? Learning theory in vogue speaks of the importance of "process over product." How do the students work their way through a problem and ultimately solve it? Many suggest that the effort and experience attained gained in that process is far more important and valuable than any grade could ever explain. Paradox?

School without assessments? That might be a good thing! In many states, music education (or arts education) is required by law. And, all but one state has specific academic standards in place for these areas. Yet, only a few states have any sort of assessment to measure whether this requirement is being met. Many states have declared that it is the districts responsibility to determine whether or not students are fulfilling state standards. That is a good thing, except for the fact that the state does not require districts to report on any of it! There is no reporting mechanism in place. Under the strains of budget cuts, many administrators have decided to forego or reduce arts education for that reason and to spend more time in areas that are reported. More paradox.

And what about the students? Assessment should provide students with feedback on progress and their learning. It should offer suggestions of what needs to be reviewed. It should offer the teacher a "teachable moment" – "here's what you should do next time." It should motivate students to learn more or dig deeper into a new, more complex problem. With all the wonderful things assessment can and should do for them, it does one important thing in the eyes of students – it gives them a grade. How important are grades? Students reminding us how they need to get an A in our course to get into a good college have approached us all. The paradox is found within them as well.

With all of this in mind, it is not difficult to understand why assessment has become so ubiquitous in today's educational climate. So, now what?

Assessment as Paradox

The simple truth may be this... we do nothing. We should come to accept that assessment has become paradoxical and look at it and use it with that knowledge in hand. Assessment can be used in a number of ways and mean many different things to many different stakeholders. Assessment in this vein is here to stay. It is important that we begin to view assessment in this light if we are to get over this latest hurdle and advance education.

We might get started by asking ourselves a few questions when considering assessment in our teaching. What is the purpose of the assessment? Who is it for and why do they want it? How are the data/results to be used? What will be gained from this assessment? Or, to make it even simpler, just start with these two: What are you trying to accomplish? And, How will you know when it's been done? And, I've found that many of my best teaching moments have come as the result of considering the assessment of a lesson *before* I actually determine the lesson procedures. Having a clear eye on where I'd like to go generally leads to a better overall experience. I've also used my final assessment as a pre-test to determine what my students may already know.

I've often found that those two questions are enough to foster a great deal of thought about what assessments I will use. In my area of music, we have traditionally used a wide range of assessment tools. Most often we assess the "product" not the "process" through tools like: written tests on musical concepts; performance auditions; listening tests; analysis of musical works in written papers; written reviews of musical performances attended; proper use of musical elements in composition projects; and, even multiple choice standardized tests. All of

these have their value and place and can offer the teacher and a student with feedback to help the student improve. Lately, music educators are considering more assessments that allow students to learn more from the experience—like rubrics designed to assess performance on an instrument. These rubrics can include terminology and information that can suggest where a student might work to improve before the next performance.

As inquiry-based and constructivist education is working its way into music education, new assessment possibilities are also arising. Teachers are asking their students to solve musical problems much like those that real composers, performers or listeners might be required to solve. Let's consider a lesson where students are asked to compose a variation on their school song. Students can build upon the knowledge and insights they have gathered from their experiences as musicians. Teachers can monitor their progress by assessing the procedure students used to solve the problem as well as the final outcome—a piece of music. Here, the same project—writing a composition—can be used to assess both product and process. Students will learn from both assessments!

How do we deal with the variety of stakeholders involved? It seems that the greatest paradox may be here. Parents and students are interest in progress, principals are often interested in the individual cognitive development of students (McCoy, 1991), school boards and community members are often concerned with meeting curricular goals, the state is interested in meeting state standards and the federal leadership seems interested in test scores. Is there one assessment that can do all of this?

One form of assessment gaining in popularity is the portfolio. It can include all and any kinds of work—written tests, standardized tests, recordings of performances, compositions, papers, anything! Many music educators are keeping this information in electronic formats on websites that anyone can access. The variety of information here can provide a strong view of how a student has developed. There seems to be something here that all of the stakeholders can use to make their assessment of student learning.

Finally...

I firmly believe that any dialogue about assessment in education is only going to produce positive results for students. I applaud Educational Leadership for taking on this issue and offer that more contemplation is needed.

What I am most excited about, however, is that the education has moved its emphasis to learning and away from teaching. And, for me, there is the most important paradox of them all—assessment should be about what students have learned and not what has been taught to them. It is not about us as teachers, it is about our students. That means that assessment practice should reflect that shift. Can assessment of that kind be done? Considering the paradox of assessment AND assessment as paradox may be the answer. I challenge all of you to do just that.

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About the Author

Dr. Doug Orzolek serves as an Associate Professor of Music Education and the Associate Director of Bands at the University of St. Thomas in St. Paul, Minnesota. At St. Thomas, Dr. Orzolek teaches music education methods, conducts the Symphonic Band, teaches introduction to music, music literature and conducting. He also teaches workshops and core classes in the graduate program. In Minnesota, Dr. Orzolek serves as the President of the Minnesota Music Educators Association and has served on the Board of Directors of the Minnesota Band Directors Association. Dr. Orzolek received the 2001 Mansfield University Young Alumni Award and was named to the Mansfield University Music Alumni Honor Roll. In 2003, the students of St. Thomas named him the “*Distinguished Educator of the Year*.” His thoughts and work have been published in the *Journal of Band Research*, the *Music Educators Journal*, *Teaching Music*, *General Music Today* and *School Band and Orchestra Magazine*. He has recently made presentations at the 2004 MENC National Conference, the 2004 Midwest Clinic, the 2005 CBDNA National Conference, and the 2004 College Music Society National Conference. Dr. Orzolek’s research interests and presentations include: comprehensive musicianship; technology in teacher preparation; secondary general music; constructivism in music education; advocacy; accountability; and assessment. Dr. Orzolek holds a BM from Mansfield University, a MEd from Penn State University and a PhD from the University of Minnesota—all in music education.

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